Marx and Engels on "Nature."
Early Beginnings of Elements of Environmental History?

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Abstract

The German Ideology provides themes from which to establish principles for the study of environmental history - without suggesting that Marx was a founder of the latter. Paradoxically, human production and its relation to nature, whilst necessary to sustain life, now threaten such through continued misappropriation thereof. Human nature, *what* we produce, and *how* it is produced, need re-thinking in light of ecological feedback. Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, is relevant and predates the idea that environmental history developed from Marxist social history writing. Suggested principles for further research in respect of environmental history, are: competition, ownership, production, appropriation, the global, practice and consciousness.

The purpose of this cryptic article is to determine if a limited coverage of *The German Ideology* contains sufficient basis to derive relevant principles for environmental historical research.[1]

For Marx, an individual (whether e.g. a hunter or fisherman) who experiences free competition, is not "free from the bonds of nature."[2] When the dialectic relationship between nature and human production (for capitalist competition) is applied to environmental history, it means that mankind cannot ignore the forces of nature that impact on him/her, e.g. the intermittent opening and closing of the ecologically sensitive the East and West Kleinemonde estuaries (Seafield, South Africa) respectively. Their behaviour influence e.g. how we study fish biota, or conduct our recreational fishing. In this sense, it confirms the domination of nature over man. If viewed in this limited manner, such individual is not "a product of history, but of nature."[3] The outcomes of this simplistic view, as reflected in traditional thinking,[4] is an illusion, since in the bourgeoisie era the individual becomes

[1] Engelbrecht, C. "Max Horkheimer and Environmental History. A Case for the Greater Kowie Region (Eastern Cape, South Africa)." 2013. <independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht/papers>, pp.1-15.
[2] Marx, K. "Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy", in Marx, K. and F. Engels. *The German Ideology*, p.1.
[3] *Ibid.*, p.2.
[4] Engelbrecht C. "Traditional and Critical Theory - Any Relevance for Aspects of Eastern Cape (South Africa) History?" 2011. <http://www.jakobsgaardstoltenresearch.dk/guest/laia.htm>, pp.1-10.

part of the interrelations of bourgeois society – a society now apparently at the height of its development, meaning a capitalist state of existence.[5]

Instead, when applied to environmental history, we propose that one cannot ignore the influence of human history over nature. Therefore, the dominance of man by nature is a combination of both: *viz.* history, and the influence of nature itself (e.g. floods or tides) – are interrelated historical processes. Furthermore, the laws that apply to nature – *viz.* nature's laws, are different from those made by man, for man and nature.

Our man-made laws regulate our production (productive efforts). Production, as a general abstraction, always refers to production at a certain stage of social development (e.g. modern capitalistic production), or, to production by social individuals.[6] In this sense, production is not only specific, but also relative to its unique historical conditions. What remains constant however, are the essential *instruments* of production – labour and capital.[7] But, instruments of production are not enough for our understanding of human-nature interrelatedness. The *conditions* of production determine the relative favourable or not for production to take place.[8] Such conditions of production refer to e.g. race, climatic conditions, natural conditions (e.g. distance from the sea, or fertility of the soil), etc.[9] Two points need to be considered: firstly, all production is appropriation of nature in some form or another, and secondly, when we talk about property (since we produced something that belongs to someone), the questions of protection thereof, laws that regulate such, and ownership, come into play.[10] In terms of environmental history, appropriation of nature means to some extent the extraction of natural material from nature with the intension to produce something. Appropriation mostly leads to the destruction of nature, and at worst, the extinction of species. Secondly, *what* we produce might be harmful in its own right – sometimes we did not intend neither extinction, nor intended harmful pollution, over-use, or unsustainability. Whilst Marx wrote about "communal property,"[11] we argue philosophically, that nature and the natural environment belong to all peoples, which is in a sense, "communal property." Granted, Marx's context was different from ours, but the principle remains. Property is also manifested in colonial terms[12] and historians of empire, colonialism and imperialism, give such much attention.

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[5] Marx, K. Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy", in Marx, K. and F. Engels. *The German Ideology,* p.2.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid.,* p.3.
[8] See for instance Federn, K. *The Materialist Conception of History. A Critical Analysis.*
[9] Marx, K. "Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy", in Marx, K. and F. Engels. *The German Ideology,* p.4.
[10] *Ibid.,* p.5.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] Engelbrecht, C. "Marx's Theory of Colonisation and Contemporary Eastern Cape (South Africa) Historiography." 2012. <http://independent.academia.edu.christoengelbrecht/Papers1755482>, pp.1-17.

Marx's treatment of the common relation of production=consumption=production, production=distribution, and finally exchange and circulation,[13] needs our attention. In other words, Marx saw the constituent components of society in the context of their *"mutual relations between these various elements."*[14] Later in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels would describe the "*all-round* dependence" of the "*world-historical* co-operation of individuals."[15] In relation to environmental history, when e.g. production appropriate natural resources, it does so with the objective to produce something to be *consumed.* The productive process and commodity products are related through the process of exchange. In essence, the environment is destroyed and altered into a consumable product which comes about as a result of human labour of some sorts. When e.g. farming labour extracts from nature the material necessary to create e.g. a park with all it amenities for visitors to "consume" and pay for with money, then the capitalist system dominates both man and nature. The spread (distribution) of various parks across a country's land, and the distribution of man and material for such, happened at the expense of nature. In Marxist terms, such production is mainly for the pleasure of the bourgeoisie, because the labourers of production (the workers) cannot afford bourgeois leisure activities. The environment is exploited by the bourgeoisie, for the bourgeoisie. Of course, some would argue that since "bourgeois society is the most highly developed and most highly differentiated historical organization of production,"[16] small wonder that global exchange impacts negatively on the natural environment – in modern-day terms, international tourism to ecologically sensitive destinations, is an example.

Marx and Engels's distinction between the Old and Young Hegelians is of value – "the Old Hegelians" they wrote, "had *understood* everything… [t]he Young Hegelians *criticized* everything."[17] In our view, man did not only produce material things (objects), but in line with their view of the Young Hegelians who ""consider[ed] conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness,"[18] we consider all these relations as the results (outcomes) of the production of the consciousness. In other words, nothing just happens – not in nature, and neither in human society. Some outcomes, clearly, we often did not intend – for instance, pollution. Consciously produced relations organize individuals relative to others and nature. This means also in relation to "*produce* their means of subsistence."[19] When they produce their means of subsistence, they produce their material life.[20] In our view, material life includes nature. *What* they have produced made them

[13] Marx, K. "Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy", in Marx, K. and F. Engels. *The German Ideology,* pp.7-15.
[14] *Ibid.,* p.15. (Emphasis in original.)
[15] Marx, K. and F. Engels. *The German Ideology,* p.59
[16] Marx, K. "Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy", in Marx, K. and F. Engels. *The German Ideology,* p.20.
[17] Marx, K. and F. Engels. *The German Ideology,* p.35.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.,* p.37.
[20] *Ibid.*

dependent thereon, because that would not have been produced in the first instance. Marx put it this way: "[w]hat individuals are depends on the material conditions of their production."[21]

Consequently, the productively active individual is productive in a particular manner. This implies that both the act and process of active producing do not take place in a vacuum and is not mutually exclusive from the other. Instead, human production represents a relation that is not independent from social and political relations.[22] Since production takes place at a particular point in time and place, it implies the concept of "space."[23] In a deleted passage in the original manuscript, the following sentence was left out: "the ideas which these individuals form are ideas either about their relation to nature or about their mutual relations or about their own nature."[24] Nature, therefore, was a determining variable in Marx's thinking – in any case, human ideas are interconnected with manmade material activity – production; man's own nature, and or nature in itself. Therefore, man's conception or ideas are about real life, his own nature, and nature itself.[25] As man changes, and as man's material production changes and his relations thereto also change, so is the material world also changing, as are his "thinking and the products of his thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness."[26] So considered, it is then important to note that Marx and Engels guarded against the over-importance of *ideas* in their own right. According to them, ideas originate from specific social conditions – conditions which are in turn, embedded in the material conditions of life. In other words, the production and re-productions of social life's material base, augments everything else. But ideas in themselves produce nothing. Only through human practical action are they intelligible.[27] It embodies the "self-creation" of man.[28] Gajo Petrović called this *praxis.*[29]

Marx and Engels wrote *Die Deutsche Ideologie* in 1845 and 1846 in Brussels and dealt with the conditions necessary for man's true liberation in the chapter on Feuerbach.[30] Liberation of man is not promoted by reducing philosophy, theology or substance to "self-consciousness."[31] Instead, they wrote, liberation "is a historical and not a mental act"[32] and not, as Lukács would later write, that "natural relations are socially conditioned.[33] The relations above, as seen by philosophers, according to Marx and Engels, imply some form of domination amongst them – man over nature, or nature over man, and between men.

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[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.,* Marx, K. and F. Engels. *The German Ideology,* p.41.
[23] Engelbrecht, C. "The Kowie History Museum and Historical Research." 2013. <independent.academia.edu.christoengelbrecht>, pp.1-8.
[24] Marx, K. and F. Engels. *The German Ideology.* See footnote ** on p.41.
[25] For a discussion about Marx's view of human nature, see Bober, M. M. *Karl Marx's Interpretation of History,* pp.67-94.
[26] Marx, K. and F. Engels. *The German Ideology,* p.42.
[27] See Mclellan, D. *The Thought of Karl Marx. An Introduction.*
[28] Bottomore, T. "Introduction", in Bottomore, T. (ed.) *Makers of Modern Social Science. Karl Marx,* p.8.
[29] Petrović, G. "Marx's Concept of Man", in Bottomore, T. (ed.) *Interpretations of Marx,* p.144.
[30] Marx, K. and F. Engels. *The German Ideology,* pp.43-44.
[31] *Ibid.,* p.43.
[32] *Ibid.,* p.44.
[33] Lukács, G. *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics,* p.235.

Hundred years after Marx and Engels wrote *The German Ideology*, their influence on Horkheimer and Adorno was clear. They wrote in the early mid-1940s that "[w]hat we had set out to do was … to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism."[34] The key tenant of course, of early and modern-day Critical Theory, was the eradication of all forms of domination – domination over nature that also implies domination of man over fellow humans.[35] In this regard, one can make the following observation: Marx's Eleventh thesis on Feuerbach was later restated by Habermas to the extent that he "developed the idea of a theory of society with a practical intention…"[36]

For Marx and Engels, industry creates our world around us and in so doing changes the social system in line with our changing human needs. Human needs have always been in relation to human unity with nature and industry[37] respectively. The production of our material life-world was the first historical act to satisfy man's needs. It is therefore a question of human existence, and the writing thereof (in other words, history), reflects a materialist basis.[38] Since humans create their own existence on a daily basis, they also create other humans – e.g. the family. The family is based on certain relations who in turn create new social relations that are perpetuated in the form of increased population with its own new productive requirements.[39] The result is that our study of history[40] takes place in relation to the history of industry and exchange. It follows therefore that a materialist connection exists between people and their consciousness as a social product.[41] The different social relations come in contradiction with their productive forces, the state, and one another. This contradiction is the result of the division of labour – for instance in the family. It is the division of labour that layers society - into individual families, for instance, that opposes each other. This opposition implies unequal distribution of property[42] in society.

Since humans have different claims to property, it needs to be protected. The division of labour and the reality of different property claims bring up the question of differences in human needs. On the one hand we find "individual needs," on the other "general (common) needs of the state."[43] Common interests are considered "alien" or "fremd," to individual interests.[44] This contradiction gives rise to the need for *practical* struggle[45] between interest groups. Practical struggle compels active state-intervention. How we control = how we behave to one another. The problem is that *what* we

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[34] Horkheimer, M. and T. W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments,* p.(x).
[35] Horkheimer, M. *Eclipse of Reason,* pp.63 ff.
[36] Habermas, J. *Theory and Practice,* p.1.
[37] Marx K. and F. Engels. *op. cit.,* p.45.
[38] *Ibid.,* pp.47-48.
[39] *Ibid.,* p.48.
[40] Engelbrecht, C. "Limitations in History. Part II. Theory and Eastern Cape Historical Research." 2012. <http://independent.academia.edu.christoengelbrecht/papers>, pp.1-12.
[41] Marx K. and F. Engels. *op. cit.,* pp.48-49.
[42] *Ibid.,* p.51.
[43] *Ibid.,* p.52.
[44] *Ibid.,* p.53.
[45] Ibid. (Italics in original.)

have produced and want to control, grows out of our own control[46] and ends up in the hands (control) of the exploitive bourgeoisie and its capitalist state. The result is man's estrangement ("entfremdung") in relation to the "unendurable" power at the expense of the "propertyless." These result in a world-historical struggle for want.[47] Human activities, therefore, reshapes both nature and man, by man.[48] This reflects man's *all-round* dependence – meaning what is required, is a *world-historical* co-operation[49] between individuals. The materialist conception of history calls for the practical overthrow of the actual social relations[50] in capitalist society.

Conclusion

Marx and Engels were not environmental historians neither did they consciously formulate principles therefor because at the time of their productive intellectualism, environmentalism was not a conscious concern[51] in literature or every-day society. Nevertheless, Marx made direct contributions to social theory,[52] as did later Marxist philosophy.

Both the materialist conceptions of life and the rise of environmentalism are not easy to define. What is clear is the distinction that Cilliers made between what is *complicated* and *complex,*[53] is useful to understand seemingly separated spheres of life, and the environment. Consequently, there is a greater realization about the difficulty to separate discourse analysis from the analysis of different stakeholders, their motivations, and objectives. This necessitates grander appreciation of the study of local conflicts in an all-embracing broader historical perspective.[54] In fact, the globalization and capitalization of nature, obscures the distinction between the local and global.[55] Even the influence of culture in human adaptation and transforming of ecosystems, need re-defining, since Marx started not with productive activity of man in society and nature, but with productive activities of real individuals.[56]

In our view, the following (there might be many more) provisional principles can be formulated. Man is not separate from nature because as much as human consciousness shape man, he exists within

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[46] *Ibid.*
[47] *Ibid.*, p.54.
[48] *Ibid.*, p.58.
[49] *Ibid.*, p.59.
[50] *Ibid.*, p.61.
[51] [Ed.] "Marx on the Environment", in <library.thinkquest.org/2606/Economics/Marxism-on-the-environment.html>
[52] Bottomore, T. B. and M. Rubel (eds.) *Karl Marx. Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy,* p.7.
[53] Cilliers, P. *Complexity and Postmodernism. Understanding Complex Systems.*
[54] Schubert, J. *Political Ecology in Development Research. An Introductory Overview and Annotated Bibliography,* pp.17-18.
[55] Toly, N. "Globalization and Capitalization of nature. A Political Ecology of Biodiversity in Mesoamerica", in *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society,* Vol.24, No.1, Feb. 2004, p.48. See also Engelbrecht, C. Globalization Theory and Reference to Aspects of Eastern Cape (South Africa) History. <http://africalit.nai.uu.se/exlibris/aleph/a18> 2011 (Accessed on 3 February 2013), pp.1-10.
[56] Greenberg, J. B. and T. K. Park. "Political Ecology", in *Journal of Political Ecology,* Vol.1, 1994, pp.1, 5.

nature.[57] Viewed from this perspective, nature is no longer merely an ontological construct, neither only the object of scientific inquiry.[58] This does not imply disrespect for the facts of the matter.[59] Secondly, man-made laws about nature are only true in relation to the history or nature. Thirdly, *how* and *what* we produce reflect on the nature of man. Man's appropriation takes place in a usage that is adapted to his own needs. There is no longer any need to debate continued over-extraction of natural resources that "degrade or significantly alter the elements of an ecosystem, 'tipping' it beyond its ability to recover."[60] Fourthly, the material base of production takes place at the expense of its natural resources, compromising any conception about the "superabundance"[61] in nature. More than a "political necessity"[62] is required in order to rectify the contradiction between human needs and actual human conditions.[63] Fifthly, domination needs to be reversed – not only from an ethical point of view, but also from and enlightened practical perspective. As a result, and lastly, contemplation about nature is not enough – instead practical actions are required for the survival of all species – humankind included. This leads to the broader discussion of the concept *praxis.*

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[57] Avineri, S. *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx,* p.71.
[58] Leff, E. "Political Ecology – A Latin American Perspective", [Eds.] UNESCO-EOLSS Joint Committee. *The Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems,* p.21.
[59] Engelbrecht, C. "Limitations in History. Part 1: Problems with Historical Facts", in *Toposcope,* Vol.xli, 2010, pp.40-52.
[60] Brogden, M. J. and J. B. Greenberg. "The Fight for the West: A Political Ecology of Land Use Conflicts in Arizona", in *Human Organisation,* Vol.62, No.3, 2003, p.289.
[61] Morris, W. "Art, Labour, and Socialism", in Solomon, M. *Marxism and Art. Essays Classic and Contemporary,* p.88.
[62] McLennan, G. *Marxism and the Methodologies of History,* p.220.
[63] Rader, M. *Marx's Interpretation of History,* p.20.

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